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**Behrouz Boochani**  
**The truth about  
self-harm in  
offshore detention**



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Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton (right) and Prime Minister Scott Morrison speak to the media in the western Brisbane suburb of Wacol.

Credit: AAP Image / Jono Searle

In recent weeks, political debate over the medevac legislation has re-emerged in the Australian media. The Liberal Party pushes its view that the legislation needs to change. In order to achieve its objectives, the party has continued its chaotic program of propaganda and hate – a tactic Peter Dutton and his fellow ministers have used for years to maintain the policy of exiling refugees to Manus and Nauru.

Dutton made scathing accusations against refugees, saying they self-harm only so they can come to Australia using the medevac laws. He claims advocates push them to engage in these acts.

Dutton has always attacked the victims, rather than provide explanations for their actions. But his rhetoric is damaging for many reasons, not least because it denies refugees agency. He assumes advocates are influencing their decisions. He thinks of refugees as people empty of political will.

In truth, this is a system so cruel and inhumane that it forces the imprisoned refugees to hurt themselves. These forms of violence are in their very essence the consequences of this violent system. Fundamentally, it is a system that has for years exploited the bodies and souls of human beings and absorbed them into its own ruthless logic. These examples of violence within the system represent the spirit of the oppressive overlord – self-harm is a product of the system.

This violence produced by the system spreads through every part of the prison and, ultimately, is reproduced by the imprisoned refugees. If anyone should be forced to offer an explanation for this situation, it is Peter Dutton and the Department of Home Affairs.

Dutton's attempts to frame refugees as passive and incapable victims, devoid of any decision-making ability, is nothing but another dehumanisation.

Dutton's thinking is based on an equation that positions knowledgeable Australians on one side and ignorant refugees on the other. This equation is oppressive. It figures refugees as nothing but children waiting for others to tell them what to do. But these latest comments are not the first time he has made this kind of gross reduction without providing any evidence.

In November 2017, the refugees on Manus resisted the extreme violence of the prison system for 23 days. On a number of occasions, the Home Affairs minister explicitly accused certain politicians and advocates of guiding the collective resistance, that the mastermind behind it resided outside the island. In reality, it was the refugees who rallied together and made decisions as a group about how to proceed. They were the ones who understood exactly how best to challenge the system.

Dutton's attempts to frame refugees as passive and incapable victims, devoid of any decision-making ability, is nothing but another dehumanisation. This system has never acknowledged refugees as human beings. It has tried to erase our existence in almost every instance; and whenever there was some reference to our existence we were always stripped of agency. The system depends on this perspective, and it has tried its best to justify and consolidate the perspective at the same time. Therefore, from this point of view, the following statement becomes a logical interpretation: "Other people are ordering you to self-harm."

Self-harm and suicide in Australia's detention industry is an extremely complex issue; it has resulted in death on many occasions. But it is impossible to reduce it to a simple general insult, as Dutton has tried to do.

For years our bodies have been made the subjects of politics and power. As such, they have become the last thing we have left with which to make a statement regarding the abuse of our

human rights. Just imagine a young man battling many illnesses for six years only to be ignored by the system and refused treatment. What other option does he have?

A week has never gone by when we have not experienced an instance of self-harm on Manus. And when someone self-harms here they do not only harm themselves – in fact, they perpetuate stress and a particular form of violence throughout the community around them. This is the cause of great suffering. It is extremely difficult to see a young man in agony. You soon realise both of you are suffering the same pain. Many people who have not self-harmed are still traumatised to a large extent by witnessing many self-harm incidents. When someone attempts suicide or self-harm, everyone is absorbed in the pain.

For many, the 2019 federal election was a great shock. “I always believed in miracles,” the prime minister responded. But on Manus, after the results were announced, we experienced a massive increase in self-harm. On some days, there were as many as 10 incidents. The situation was out of control. Within three months more than 100 incidents were recorded. Many ended up in the local hospital on Manus, a filthy place with very poor conditions. It does not have facilities for psychological care. It does not even have the most basic equipment necessary to provide medical treatment to sick refugees. And yet, in the months after the election, at least three or four beds in the hospital were always occupied by injured refugees. This situation certainly has a direct relationship with the outcome of the Australian election.

And we were not alone. During the campaign, and in its wake, I participated in dozens of events for my book, *No Friend But the Mountains*. Although I am only able to communicate with the Australian people using my mobile phone, the difference in mood before and after the election among Australian civil society was clear to me. Pre-election, the atmosphere was full of hope for change. Then came a climate of defeat and hopelessness.

Australians who are experiencing this sense of hopelessness and defeat are living a free life and have opportunities to be active in society. But for the imprisoned refugees on Manus and Nauru the election results had an immediate impact on our fate. This election could have resulted in our freedom from these islands and settlement in New Zealand. This was the plan announced by the Labor Party and it was likely they would have accepted the New Zealand offer if they had been successful at the federal election.

Instead, the Morrison government remains in power. And the weary human beings locked up on these islands, who have already lost years of their lives, experience an even more extreme psychological shock. It is hard to convey the intensity of the hopelessness and fear the election evoked on Manus and Nauru. For us, it was like a sledgehammer crushing our heads. Many fear we will never get off this island, that we will be forgotten.

Now just imagine that during this tragic period someone like Peter Dutton makes an insulting and completely baseless statement about refugees exploiting the medevac legislation. The minister showed no concern whatsoever for the wellbeing of these damaged and weary souls. He blamed advocates for coaching people to self-harm.

For years the Australian government has been lying to the nation. They always say refugees receive proper medical services on these islands. This is certainly not the case. If it were true

then the medevac legislation would never have passed. If Dutton were telling the truth, no refugee would have been transferred to Australia through this process. It is a massive lie – and Dutton knows better than anyone else that, in this system, illness is weaponised against refugees.

The fact is that dozens of sick people have been denied treatment for years on Manus and Nauru. But the Department of Home Affairs is terrified of the medevac law being recognised as appropriate. And so Peter Dutton levels his baseless and demonising insult against refugees. Self-harm and attempted suicide are part of the reality of incarceration on Manus Island and Nauru. This is exactly what the Australian people and the politicians who represent them need to acknowledge.

The imprisoned refugees here on these islands always feel the shadow of death hovering overhead. Death is as close as it possibly can be. The truth is that 12 people have lost their lives here in the past six years and hundreds of others have injured themselves.

But the truth is not what Dutton tells us. This man and his department are responsible for this situation, and one day they must answer for what they have done. This is the truth.

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